

Investigating the use of social media tools by destination marketing organisations.

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The objective of this study is to ascertain the extent to which Destination Marketing Organisations (DMOs) utilise social media tools in a bid to promote their tourism destinations to the world. In a tourism sense in particular, social media provide the ideal platforms for individuals to connect and share travel experiences with friends and family (Munar & Jacobsen 2013). Howison et al. (2014) illustrate the experiential, intangible nature of the tourism product in exploring the pivotal role that social media can have in the decision-making process of prospective travellers. Destination marketers must, therefore, embed a structure which looks to harness and nourish the online conversation focused around their destination via engaging with users of these social media platforms in a way which is not seen as intrusive or dominated by corporate themes.

This study employs a mixed-methods approach. An online survey was conducted in the summer of 2014, whereby 63 national and state-level (USA) DMOs were surveyed on their current social media activities and internal structure. Semi-structured interviews were also conducted (face-to-face and via Skype) in order to further probe the users' perceptions of social media and to gauge its usefulness within their organisation's marketing activities.

Usage of social media among DMOs varies a great deal. While all DMOs surveyed have an official presence on Facebook, usage of the many other networks remains sporadic. Increased worldwide usage of social media along with the growing trend of prospective travellers conducting research on potential holiday destinations online were the two most prevalent motivations behind DMOs venturing into social media; 72% and 58% (respectively) of those surveyed gave a rating of five out of five in terms of their importance behind their decision to engage with social media.

The majority of survey respondents (84%) allocate between just one and five individuals to maintain their social media presences, while 36% say that they have no single person in the organisation specifically allocated to social media, instead social media is seen as supplementary to their main role in the organisation. A total of 38% stated that they expect their social media team to expand over the next 12 months, while 67% of those surveyed claim building 'Brand Awareness' to be the most important aspect of engaging in social media, ahead of the more finance-focused metrics, such as 'Sales/Increase Visitor Numbers' (7%) and 'Cost Reduction' (2%).

In terms of social media's potential impact on tourism numbers, the interviewee from Tourism Ireland explained the positive impact that social media has had on Ireland's tourism brand exposure worldwide. He explained how Tourism Ireland can definitively say that 174,314 people travelled to Ireland in 2013 (during The Gathering initiative) after viewing one or more of Tourism Ireland's promotional ads on social media. He did add, however, that while it's certainly correlation, it is not necessarily causality. Such difficulty in attributing social media activities to growth in tourism numbers, therefore, remains a stiff challenge for all DMOs.

Academic research in social media remains in its infancy, with the current fleet of platforms in a constant state of change and mutation. In a world whereby consumers are turning to peer reviews

and the persuasive power of corporate marketing initiatives continue to decline, DMOs have now been charged with the task of building and maintaining an online community of brand advocates who will endeavour to bolster the destination's image in online forums. While some are still getting to grips with social media, it remains a pivotal platform for self-promotion, community engagement, and market analysis, and will continue to be long into the future.

Keywords: Social media, Destination Marketing Organisations, tourism marketing.

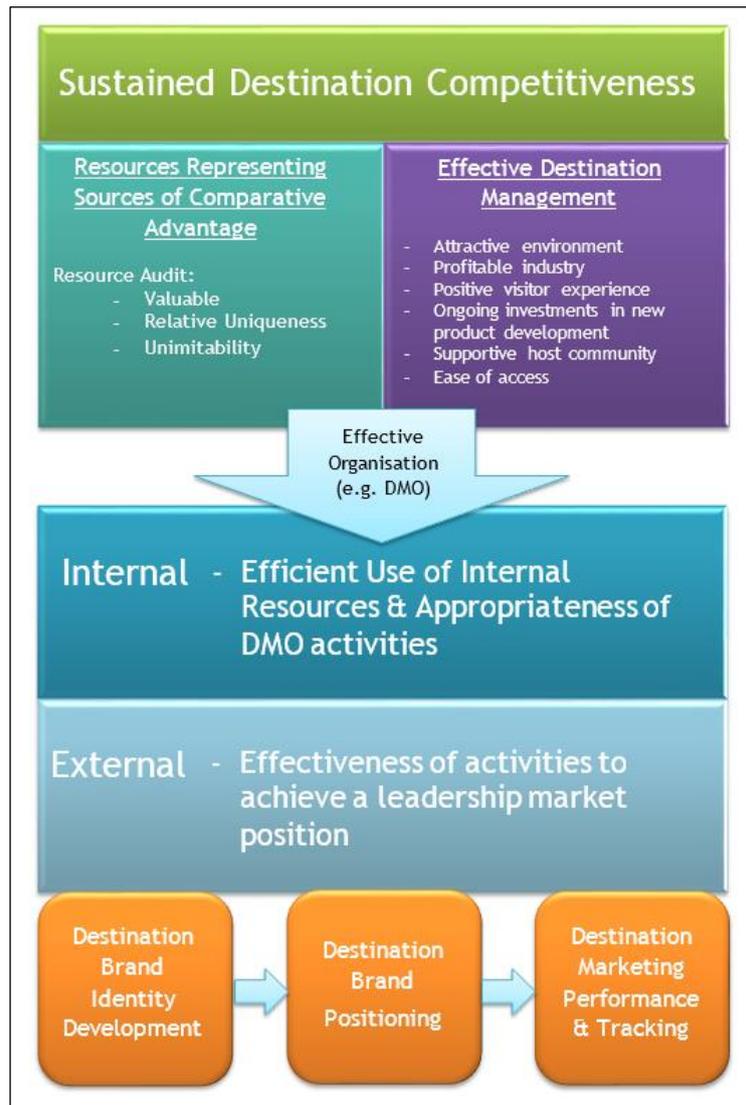
INTRODUCTION

Social media has become ubiquitous and omnipresent, and has changed the world in which we live and various aspects of our lives (Theunissen 2015). Of the circa 7.2 billion individuals that make up the world's population, over 3 billion of these (42%) are internet users and just over 2 billion are active social media users (29%) (We Are Social 2015). The tourism industry in particular stands to benefit significantly from social media through the culmination of positive word-of-mouth among consumers as well as brand awareness and the formation of brand-advocating communities.

As this study will explore, DMOs now have the capability to identify and connect with very specific types of tourists and target their marketing activities to impose maximum impact on the consumer through the supply of carefully designed and procured content. This study will address how DMOs have taken to social media and sought to ensure their destination remains high on the list of potential suitors to prospective travellers. The findings from this study will not only complement the limited, but ever-increasing, volume of social media-related studies, but also inform destination marketers of the state of social media and provide an outline strategy which may be adopted in furtherance of their social media marketing activities.

The conceptual framework for this study is based on the "Destination Marketing Framework" posited by Pike and Page (2014) within their narrative analysis of destination marketing literature published since 1973. The authors of the article themselves state the aim of their literature review as to attempt to ascertain the extent of which a DMO is responsible for the competitiveness of a tourism destination. The authors also sought to graphically represent the culminating internal and external factors pivotal in sustaining destination competitiveness. In particular, the effectiveness of activities seeking to achieve and maintain a leadership market position are highlighted within the theoretical model, displayed in Figure 1.

Figure 1: Destination Marketing Framework (Pike & Page 2014)



The above theoretical framework will form the basis for part of the discussion of the findings of this study. While the model serves as an accurate representation of a DMO’s marketing endeavours, it does not address the area of social media specifically. It is the aim of this study to alleviate this discrepancy and discuss implications of social media specifically on the framework. The discussion will look at the how social media plays a part in the marketing activities of DMOs, with the aim being to establish and develop a brand identity, achieve a competitive market position across multiple regions in the world, while also being able to continuously monitor the performance of their social media endeavours.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Increased globalisation toward the end of the 20th century resulted in the marketing of places becoming a much more sophisticated area, attracting special interest from practitioners (Baker & Cameron 2008). Kiráľová and Pavlíčka (2015) also cite globalisation as changing the nature of travellers’ needs and attitudes and contributing to an increase in the volume of information that destinations now have to analyse in order to remain competitive. The rise of Web 2.0, a term

attributed to O'Reilly (2005; cited in Lange-Faria & Elliot 2012), has acted as an online launch-pad in facilitating conversation amongst individuals and groups from around the world in real-time using communications technologies that are evolving at such a rapid rate (cf. Lorenzon 2013). Howison *et al.* (2014) concur with this notion in discussing how consumers now have the power to 'pull' whichever information they want to consume, decreasing the power of the traditional broadcast or 'push' messages.

Luo and Zhong (2015) cite the worldwide upsurge in destination marketing as a "significant symbol" of Web 2.0 and the boom in the use of social media. Kiráľová and Pavlíčka (2015) add that destinations are traditionally defined as ...

"... territories, geographical areas, such as a country, an island or town (Davidson & Maitland, 2000), with political and legislative framework for tourism marketing and planning." (Kiráľová & Pavlíčka 2015).

Tourism destinations have been cited as being difficult to manage due their being multifaceted, with the presence of "complex relationships of their diverse public and private stakeholders" (Mistilis, Buhalis, & Gretzel 2014, cf. Stienmetz *et al.* 2015). Nevertheless, the authors highlight the wide ...

"... range of opportunities and challenges created by the emergence of social media that destinations can use advantageously" (Mistilis *et al.* 2014).

Standing *et al.* (2014) describe how there has been a substantial increase in the number of publications in academic journals surrounding the area of internet use in tourism, while Pike and Page (2014) pinpoint the year 1973 as the point of origin of the destination marketing field, while also noting how academic research in the area of DMO strategy development "appears to be scant" at present. While destination management and marketing have been described as "relatively new phenomena" in both practice and literature, they are now recognised as integral success factors of tourism destinations (Morrison 2013).

Previous researchers have also highlighted the existence of gaps in the existing literature regarding specifically the use of social media by tourism DMOs; little research has been conducted to examine how tourism entities are evolving with the internet and employing social media in a bid to market and promote tourism destinations and to engage with current and potential customers (Hays *et al.* 2013; Morosan 2015; Munar 2012). Ratchford (2015) outlines the need for further research on marketing in the presence of social media, as social media's marketing implications still remain unclear. Pike and Page (2014) note the lack of studies examining the relationship between advertising and sales within the marketing literature, and state how this has spread to also include destination marketing literature specifically.

Pan and Crotts (2012) highlight the "long distance between academia and the industry" coupled with the "slow process of the formal publishing cycle" as posing a significant challenge for researchers to keep up with the fast-changing social media landscape. Oliveira and Panyik (2015) state that there exists ...

"... a lack of theoretical awareness and empirical research into the role of social media in shaping destination brands" (Oliveira & Panyik 2015).

El Ouiridi *et al.* (2015) describe social media tools as ...

“... online tools that allow users to share content, collaborate, and build networks and communities, with the possibility of reaching and involving large audiences ...” (El Ouiridi *et al.* 2015).

Carr and Hayes (2015) also offer their definition:

“Social media are Internet-based channels that allow users to opportunistically interact and selectively self-present, either in real-time or asynchronously, with both broad and narrow audiences who derive value from user-generated content and the perception of interaction with others.” (Carr & Hayes 2015).

Social media are gaining prominence as an element of a DMO’s marketing strategy at a time when public sector cuts to funding are necessitating the search for greater value in the way marketing budgets are spent (Hays *et al.* 2013, cf. Oliveira & Panyik 2015), with these organisations facing further budget cuts and curtailment of their activities if their investments cannot be justified (Morgan *et al.* 2012).

METHODOLOGY

This study looks to address three specific research questions:

1. In what way do destinations currently use social media in a bid to market their product to potential tourists (both domestic and international)?
2. How do tourism boards perceive social media as a marketing tool and how does this compare with their counterparts?
3. What are the potential benefits to tourism numbers offered by an increased focus on digital marketing?

Upon analysing the methodologies of previously published authors present within the literature, it was determined that a mixed-methods approach would be most suitable for the present study. Quantitative data was gathered via an online survey that was conducted in the summer of 2014. Zeng and Gerritsen (2014) discuss the use of surveys being of particular importance when the sample includes tourists (DMOs in this case) of varying backgrounds and cultures. Due to geographical limitations, conducting face-to-face surveys was not a possibility in this study, so utilising online tools proved to be the most feasible option.

It was first determined that only DMOs operating at a national level were to be included in the survey sample. Exceptions were made in the cases of the United States, where all States were contacted individually due to their geographical size and homogenous tourism identity and governing body. The other exception made was in the case of Australia, where various state-level DMOs were also contacted due to their diverse geographic size and tourism identity. While this strategy not only increased the target sample size for the study, it also ensured diverse, personalised accounts of individual countries’, states’ and territories’ social media strategies for the purpose of marketing.

A total of 229 DMOs were contacted via both email addresses obtained from the organisation’s official website, and via their official Facebook and Twitter presences. A total of 63 respondents completed the survey, representing a response rate of 28%. Of the 63 survey participants, 25 signified their intent to contribute further to this research, but only 3 participants completed the

follow-up questionnaire that was sent to them. Data procured from the online survey was entered into Minitab 17 statistical software, where a number of cross-tabulations, One-Way Analysis of Variance (ANOVA) and fitted-line plots were conducted in order to establish the extent of the relationships between the categorical and numerical data.

Semi-structured interviews were also identified as the prudent way to proceed with the gathering of primary data, in line with the approach taken by Jonscher (2011) in her investigation into how accommodation providers in Auckland, New Zealand use social media as a marketing tool, and also Hays *et al.* (2013) in their study into the use of social media by the top ten most popular tourism destinations' DMOs. Potential candidates were identified via elite interviewing (Mascho & Singh 2014) of a purposive sample of social media managers within DMOs, also incorporating some snowball sampling, utilising the already established networks of participants in this study. A total of nine social media managers were interviewed in this study, from a diverse range of DMOs spanning three continents. All conducted interviews were recorded, transcribed, and imported into NVivo 10 qualitative data analysis (QDA) software by this researcher. Overall, there were 13 sources of qualitative data procured in this study, stemming from the interviews and questionnaires.

These interviews were subjected to a rigorous thematic analysis so as to decipher the relevant themes, opinions and perceptions in order to satisfy the research objectives in accordance with the method set out by Braun and Clarke (2006). Sotiriadou, Brouwers, and Le (2014) cite Jones and Diment (2010) in noting how QDA software have gained more prominence in published works, and how NVivo in particular has been the most used software package in qualitative and management studies. The authors continue to elaborate how, by requiring the researcher to code the data and to develop themes or categories, it enables the researcher to “engage more meaningfully in the analysis process” (Sotiriadou *et al.* 2014).

Braun and Clarke (2006) describe thematic analysis as “a method for identifying, analysing, and reporting patterns (themes) within data.” The authors proceed to take note of how studies in the past have, in places, fallen short of reporting the process and detail of analysis. They express how previous researchers have discussed how themes “emerged from the data”, which they view as a passive account of the process of analysis, in such denying the researcher in question took up an “active role” in identifying the patterns and themes expressed in the data. Table 1 is an illustration of the six-phase structure as set out by Braun and Clarke (2006), also revisited in Clarke and Braun (2013), along with a description of each stage's application within NVivo, as well the strategic objectives of the various stages:

Table 1: Analytical Process (adapted from Braun & Clarke 2006; QDA Training 2014)

Phase	Description of the Process within NVivo	Strategic Objective	Iterative Process Throughout Analysis
1. Familiarising Yourself with the Data	Transcribing data (if necessary), reading and re-reading the data, noting down initial ideas.	Data Management Open & hierarchal coding through NVivo	Assigning data to refined concepts to portray meaning
2. Generating Initial Codes	Coding interesting features of the data in a systematic fashion across the entire data set, collating data relevant to each code.		Refining and distilling more abstract concepts
3. Searching for Themes	Collating codes into potential themes, gathering all data relevant to each potential theme.	Descriptive Accounts Reordering, 'coding on' and annotating through NVivo	Assigning data to themes/concepts to portray meaning
4. Reviewing Themes	Checking if the themes work in relation to the coded extracts (Level 1) and the entire data set (Level 2), generating a thematic 'map' of the analysis.		Assigning meaning
5. Defining and Naming Themes	Ongoing analysis to refine the specifics of each theme, and the overall story the analysis tells, generating clear definitions and names for each theme.	Explanatory Accounts Extrapolating deeper meaning, drafting summary statements and analytical memos through NVivo	Generating themes and concepts
6. Producing the Report	The final opportunity for analysis. Selection of vivid, compelling extract examples, final analysis of selected extracts, relating back of the analysis to the research question and literature, producing a scholarly report of the analysis.		

DATA ANALYSIS & DISCUSSION

Following the thematic analysis of both the interview data and qualitative data procured from the online survey, the findings presented four core themes developed during the cycles of analysis. These include the following:

1. Department Structure & Tourism Product
2. Digital Advertising & Promotion
3. Community Building & Engagement
4. Evaluation of Digital & Social Activities

Theme 1: Department Structure & Tourism Product

This first theme was centred on the structure in place at the DMO in terms of its social media operations and how social media is viewed within the organisation.

The following is a graphical representation of the nodes within Theme 1, sourced from NVivo.

Figure 2: Theme 1: Department Structure & Tourism Product

Theme 1 - Department Structure & Tourism Product	13	293
Targets & Objectives	13	↑ 87
Team Structure & Roles	13	↘ 59
Cost, Investment, & Budget	10	↘ 44
Policy & Procedure	11	↘ 34
Outsource v In-House	10	↘ 33
Market Representation	7	↓ 20
Attractions	7	↓ 16

It was clear from conversing with those responsible for the social media operations within the DMO that it is viewed as a legitimate and essential marketing tool, but there was a recurring theme of neglect in terms of the resources that were currently being assigned to the management of their social media presences.

“... collectively we’ve probably got about three hours a day for social media that we’re doing and we would love to have more.” (Interviewee)

“It was just me really managing social media. Looking back, getting support on the day-to-day posting and moderating earlier in the project would've been helpful.” (Interviewee)

(Question) “Do you feel the current size of your social media team is sufficient?”

(Answer) “The answer is: unfortunately no!” (Questionnaire)

Some participants outlined the necessity of employing an external agency due to their knowledge of the market in which they were operating, along with their specialist skills in different areas, such as market segmentation profiles, listening software, and general level of experience in the area.

Despite the admission of some participants that outside agencies possess the requisite skills and assets for a comprehensive marketing strategy, including social media, others emphasised their own organisation’s capabilities, the ability to react quickly and the enhanced sense of control with shaping the destination brand:

“We have extensive in-house knowledge and experience ...” (Questionnaire)

“... in my experience I’ve found the best policy is to keep it in-house, because your finger is on the pulse, you know what’s happening.” (Interviewee)

Some participants in this study examined how external perceptions of their destination were currently unfavourable and that the challenge for the DMO was to shift sentiment in this regard, leveraging the power of social media and the referral power of its users:

“Our media uses (the destination) as a substitute for federal government. Before we can even begin to offer a compelling travel experience, we have a massive challenge to overcome the negative perceptions (...) For us, when we have a city that is conversational and social using digital channels and technology in a smart way, we will have achieved a shift in perception of our destination to a wider audience.” (Questionnaire)

“The existence of numerous misperceptions due to bad press and lack of adequate public relations efforts (...) The social media allows participation in ‘conversation’ and it offers great opportunities to address issues or misperceptions.” (Questionnaire)

“We focus on ... the tourism marketing and then a more recent addition to our charge has been to do global branding, which would be the perception that the world has about (the destination) and how the citizens feel about (the destination).” (Interviewee)

Theme 2: Digital Advertising & Promotion

The second theme in this study is ‘Digital Advertising & Promotion’, focusing on the mass broadcast and online advertising activities of DMOs. These efforts were separated from the community interaction and engagement (Theme 3) efforts of DMOs, as they represent a diverse set of activities which serve to work in tandem with their engagement activities, as is outlined in the graphical representation of the themes in this study (Figure 6).

Figure 3 depicts the nodes within Theme 2.

Figure 3: Theme 2: Digital Advertising & Promotion

Theme 2 - Digital Advertising & Promotion	13	263
Initiatives, Personal Brands & Collaboration	13	↑ 96
Digital Marketing Activities	12	↘ 68
Targeting	13	↘ 67
Traditional Methods	7	↓ 32

It was quite clear within this study that DMOs have recognised the referral power of these influential figures and have endeavoured to deploy these individuals wherever possible. However, the literature and the interviews highlighted significant differences in the way such initiatives must be approached, in this researcher’s opinion. A couple are outlined below:

- Transparency of the process on the part of the DMO and the influencer must be encouraged in order to maintain trust on all sides. Consumers who view such initiatives as cheap marketing tactics without any significant substance may see their outlook on the destination

as well as the influencer suffer. Transparency in how the influencer was chosen, as well as divulging how the individual or group will be compensated for their time and effort must be encouraged in order to ensure the integrity of the initiative, the DMO, and the influencer themselves cannot be called into question.

- The DMO does have a role to play in these campaigns however, and should act as mediator in such campaigns by drawing on their audience to engage with the influencer, assisting in suggesting points of interest, attractions, destination information etc. This helps the DMO's audience engage with the campaign, further enhancing visibility of the campaign hashtag, while also serving to lessen the corporate feel of the initiative, as it would be the social media users who continue the conversation.

One of the most important factors in digital marketing, not just social media, is targeting of ads and content. As such, targeting was the third most populated node within Theme 2. Targeting has become a more pronounced fixture within digital marketing literature recently, such as Hodis *et al.* (2015) and Zeng and Gerritsen (2014), to name just a couple.

In this researcher's opinion, the effective targeting of ads and content is becoming more important all the time, particularly on Facebook, as it continues to introduce changes to its newsfeed algorithm, reducing organic reach on brands' posts to a very small percentage of its fan base. This small percentage may be made up of users of very diverse ages, interests etc., not guaranteeing that all who can view the content will necessarily find it valuable or relevant to them, reducing the engagement potential of the content even further. Low engagement rates on brand content will see Facebook recognise the brand as being less important than those who receive high levels of impressions and engagement on their content, reducing their 'rank' in the eyes of Facebook, which can serve to reduce reach and visibility even further.

Many participants in this study alluded to the targeting of their content to a specific portion of their audience, as outlined by the following quotations:

"(Our destinations) ... are very unique and hence attract a niche audience that is interested in nature, rodeo, Native American traditions, festivals, arts and crafts." (Questionnaire)

"That's great because we're not exposing that message to the whole audience ... so we can target very specifically there, so it's really granular targeting." (Interviewee)

"... so what we're doing now is targeting the people who are talking about angling, golf or whatever, targeting them with specific posts to their interests, even though they may not necessarily this point in time be mentioning the Wild Atlantic Way, we're targeting the post to them." (Interviewee)

"... I think that's why Facebook is leading in terms of social media marketing because ... you have the chance to implement ads, you have the chance to really be selective on the people you want to reach out to so ... that's how we would do it." (Interviewee)

Theme 3: Community Building & Engagement

Theme 3 pertains to references from the participants in the study of their efforts to build, nurture and maintain a loyal, advocating community online. Such a continuous endeavour is critical to the long term viability of the brand in the social media arena. Previous examples of how Facebook has implemented changes to their news feed algorithm, lessening organic reach and potentially restricting brands' access to their already procured audience has prompted many bloggers on

platforms such as Social Media Today and Mashable to create posts and guide marketers as to the most effective ways to adapt to these changes. The most common underlying theme across all such publications is the emphasis on content being effectively targeted, of value to the consumer of the content, and most importantly, inspires the user to engage with it.

Figure 4 illustrates the nodes contained within Theme 3.

Figure 4: Theme 3: Community Building & Engagement

Theme 3 - Community Building & Engagement	13	344
Content & UGC	13	↑ 116
Digital Engagement Activities	10	↑ 97
eWOM & Reach	9	↔ 68
Tone & Theme	11	↔ 49
Assistance & Training	5	↓ 14

The above figure highlights references to ‘Content & UGC’ as the most populous node within Theme 3. This, in fact, is the most populated node within the entire study, underlining DMOs’ assertions that content remains the key to enabling communities to become animated and engaged around the brand. A fondness for the brand’s product or service may draw a user to liking the page, but only high quality content will ensure long-lasting engagement, loyalty, advocacy, and visibility for the brand.

Participants were very upbeat about how the various platforms enabled publication of idyllic images of the destination, and of particularly social media users’ willingness to share such images and updates with their network.

“Facebook (is the best), because it is so visual. For what we were trying to do, with the tourism aspect, it was the most visual so made the most sense.” (Interviewee)

“... given that Pinterest ... our understanding of it and the research that we’ve done ... is that Pinterest is a highly aspirational channel for travel, particularly when people are assembling bucket lists, or the most beautiful sunsets, or the most amazing waterfalls or incredible ice sculptures or auroras or those type of things, you can find any niche interest of travel and being highly visual as well, it’s a fantastic medium for that.” (Interviewee)

“So, what we have found works really well, and it doesn’t matter which channel we’re working with, are the amazing photos.” (Interviewee)

Inspiring imagery is the mainstay of any DMO’s marketing campaign, whether through traditional or digital channels. As Maurer and Hinterdorfer (2013) stated, images have a greater influence on decisions, dreams and aspirations than text alone. Due to the potentially very diverse nature of destinations, individual niche interests may be addressed through targeting of such visual content to very specific areas of the DMO’s audience, further emphasising the need for effective targeting, and illustrating the synergistic nature of the relationship between Themes 2 and 3.

Theme 4: Evaluation of Digital & Social Activities

The fourth and final theme to emerge from this study into the use of social media by destination marketing organisations pertains to their intentions and methodologies of evaluating their marketing efforts in social platforms. Previous research in the area has highlighted the need for brands to invest in developing and maintaining relationships, rather than a direct sales channel (Hodis *et al.* 2015; Verma *et al.* 2015).

Figure 5: Evaluation of Digital & Social Activities

Theme 4 - Evaluation of Digital & Social Activities	13	340
Measurement & ROI	12	↑ 91
Opportunities & Challenges	10	↑ 89
Social Media Definition & Personal Perception	11	↔ 52
Purchasing Decision & Sales	10	↔ 47
Monitoring & Listening	11	↓ 36
Future	8	↓ 25

Participants gave accounts as to what they feel are the most important metrics when evaluating their social media activities, campaigns, and content. This represents an important viewpoint for DMOs, as identification of the most important KPIs and metrics enables effective strategy evaluation. Some instance of interviewees describing their opinions on important metrics include the following:

“We don’t rely only on traditional metrics (reach, followers, engagement etc.), our success comes from socialising the entire capital.” (Questionnaire)

“It’s not just ‘how many followers?’, ‘how many likes?’, ‘how many people favourite this?’ It’s where they’re coming from. And that’s something that we didn’t use to have, I think about a year ago.” (Interviewee)

“I’m sure you have heard all the usual stuff such as the amount of likes and then the interaction which is even more important than just a like, it’s more quality.” (Interviewee)

“We do have a few occasional offers and there is a facility to sell accommodation packages through our website. But it’s not something that we do as a return on investment or any key performance metrics at the end of each year.” (Interviewee)

It is this researcher’s opinion that DMOs and other brands may potentially be lured into a false sense of security when seeking to evaluate perception within their own network, and possibly among those individuals within one or two degrees of separation from them. Their action in liking or following the brand along with their continued engagement with their content signals their favourability toward that particular brand, a concept which may be applied to the majority of their audience, as long as they haven’t been acquisitioned cheaply, as mentioned previously regarding like-bait competitions and offers. As such, carrying out effective analysis is a critical success factor of any brand, as many social media users will not always make it easy for the brand by directly contacting them via social media to vent their dissatisfaction or frustration at the service they have received, a task made all the more complex for DMOs given the vast and diverse range of tourism entities housed within any single destination.

Actual methods of measuring social media performance were also highlighted by interviewees, which included benchmarking against past performance:

“... you can just draw the parallels between the visitors and the strategies that you implemented before and after social media.” (Interviewee)

“Then every Tuesday we’d have a meeting and pinpoint “ok, that was a flop, people said it was too corporate or whatever” and we learned it that way. Pretty organic and common (sense).” (Interviewee)

There were two instances of DMOs utilising specialised formulae to attribute a value to their social media content and the amount of engagement it generates for the brand. These included the following:

- SEAV: Social Equivalent Advertising Value. Described by the interviewee as incorporating the following:

“What that does is it places an equivalent advertising value on all of the different interactions that somebody would have with us in social. We developed it because there is an awful lot of organic activity in social that inherently is worthwhile if somebody likes your brand, if they’re opening your content, they’re viewing your videos and all of this wonderful stuff, there was no way of establishing what the value of that was ...”

What SEAV entails is placing a value on three distinct types of actions on social media:

“So one is private consumption of content. So I see a Facebook post in my news feed, so I go into Facebook in the morning as I wake up and I see a post in my news feed, that’s a private consumption of content. Then there’s private actions. That would be me clicking on a link to a video and playing the video or enlarging an image or opening a tweet. So it’s a level up in engagement. And then there’s public actions. Public actions are the sharing, liking, commenting, the stuff where the real value is because I’m exposing ... potentially my (entire) friend network to the actions that I have taken with (the DMO’s) content. And so that’s the holy grail for us ... that we wanted to be able to tap into our broader network.” (Interviewee)

- The other formula was the following:

$$\text{Comments} + \text{Re-Shares} + \sqrt{\text{Likes}}$$

The interviewee described their reasoning behind incorporating this particular formula in their evaluation process:

“We don’t track likes or audience followers ... so we’ve got our own ... little formula; that’s our comments and our re-shares plus the square root of any of the likes, you know because likes are easy, people kinda thumb through and they’ll like something, so it’s less meaningful than the others. So that gives us a sum and we track that week on week, month on month to make sure that we are improving our engagement.”

While the two unique formulae outlined in this study provide valuable insight into social media content performance, they are both limited in their scope of evaluation. While the SEAV formula seeks to assign a value to their content by ascertaining the cost of reaching the same number of people through more traditional media avenues, it does not take into account the user sentiment

surrounding that piece of content. Further while the second (unnamed) formula is a much simpler formula to understand and implement, it does not take into account reach or sentiment.

While not all DMOs in this study had a concrete formula from which to draw some form of ROI value from their social media, all gave their viewpoint on how social media has benefited the brand, including the following:

“And we know that, and this is in partnership with Facebook, we know that 174,314 came to Ireland after seeing one of those (Facebook) ads. So in other words, they saw the ad and they showed up in Ireland and they logged in to Facebook while they were here.” (Interviewee)

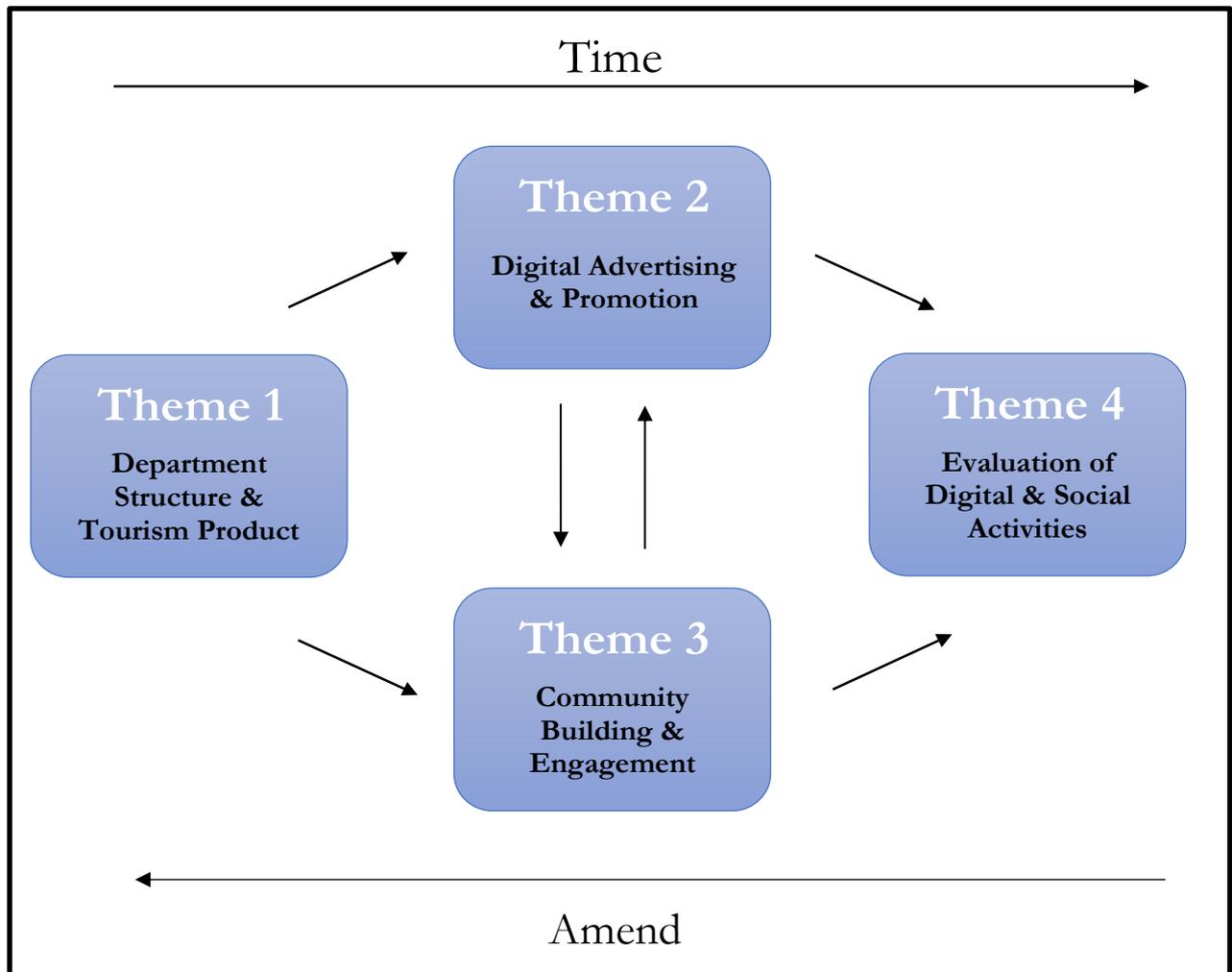
“And so, I would estimate that we would be getting about, at the moment, between 1.5 and 2 million (euro) organic SEAV off the core investment of 750,000 (euro). So that’s how we place that value on it.” (Interviewee)

“... we have an engagement level of over 4% on our page, which is massive.” (Interviewee)

“So you mean if sales and revenue (have) increased? Then yes. Since using social media? Yes, definitely. Because it’s really the thing for tourism.” (Interviewee)

To conclude, Figure 6 illustrates the themes of this study represented together as a theoretical model.

Figure 6: *Theoretical Model of the Themes in this Study*



The above figure shows a graphical representation of the themes from this study, displayed in a way which represents the stages of the marketing process where they each become relevant. Theme 1 represents the social media department structure, or at least its place within the broader marketing department of the DMO, while also making reference to the more macro factors pertaining to the tourism product itself. It essentially represents all the relevant factors in-play before the DMO seeks to launch marketing campaigns.

Theme 2 focuses on the advertising and promotion activities of DMOs in order to promote their destination to the world. These activities focused more on the campaigns, market segmentation and targeting, identifying of potential brand influencers, as well as any mentions of traditional media campaigns as a further means of promoting their destination.

Theme 3, meanwhile, focuses more on the community building and engagement activities of DMOs. The ability to sustainably engage the audience with valuable and relevant content is a critical success factor to any brand looking to succeed in social media.

Finally, Theme 4 centres on evaluation methods of DMOs in determining the success of their marketing strategies, in particular their social media endeavours. Various metrics were examined and discussed, as well as the appropriate methods of measurement, along with some limitations of the approaches taken by DMOs currently.

CONCLUSION

Implications for the Destination Marketing Framework (Pike & Page 2014)

The authors detail how “Sustained Destination Competitiveness” subsumes all other aims and objectives at a time whereby potential travellers are spoilt for choice in the availability and accessibility of destinations (Figure 1). The model describes various internal and external operations and activities undertaken by effective DMOs in their endeavours to maximise their destination’s competitiveness, described by the authors as the “quintessential goal of all DMOs” (*ibid*). The themes of this study closely reflect these sections in their sentiment and the activities that are enveloped within each, as displayed in Table 2 below:

Table 2: Linking Themes of This Study to Pike and Page’s Model

Theme from this Study	Elements from Pike & Page Model
Theme 1: Department Structure & Tourism Product	Destination Brand Identity Development
Theme 2: Digital Advertising & Promotion & Theme 3: Community Building & Engagement	Destination Brand Positioning
Theme 4: Evaluation of Digital & Social Activities	Destination Marketing Performance Measurement & Tracking

Destination Brand Identity Development

Some of the challenges as raised by participants in this study would include the ability of the DMO to reshape the identity of the destination as has already been established in the mind of the consumer, with both positive and negative instances of both having been discussed in this study. On participant discussed how their destination’s brand identity has remained consistent through time, and it is always one of positivity, particularly regarding the welcoming locals. They further emphasised how there remains limited scope to look to fundamentally change the destination’s image in order to either appeal to a different demographic or type of tourist, or indeed to move along with current trends.

Another participant, conversely, described how their destination struggles with outside perception issues due to its housing of the federal government. Due to a destination's status as a living location prior to the establishment of any tourism entities, attractions, amenities etc., any subsequent stakeholders who set up a business reliant on tourism for success also inherit the external perception of the destination and must take this into account when seeking to develop its own brand identity.

Where social media can aid in this endeavour is through the DMO's engagement with the platforms and its audience. As has already been discussed, the DMO must first develop a suitable, relevant brand identity of its destination, one which will prove to resonate positively in the eyes of the local stakeholders, as well as potential visitors, but one which is also reflective of the current perception of the destination. This should serve to bolster the already conceived notion of the destination in the eyes of the traveller, but will also give the DMO the opportunity to put a modern spin on the destination's image, with the possibility of reflecting on what the destination has to offer tourists today which it may not have 20 years ago.

Destination Brand Positioning

Social media, once again, provide the ideal platforms on which to develop and enhance the positioning of a destination's brand. Custom campaigns may be launched, catering to very specific areas of the DMO's target market, in order to maximise visibility of the destination in the eyes of the appropriate consumer. The authors themselves state that it is the responsibility of the DMO to identify and evaluate stories and narratives regarding their destination and to identify patterns in the anecdotes of visitors in order to achieve consistency and effective brand positioning.

Within the present study, such activities would be encompassed by Themes 2 and 3, involving the digital promotion activities of the DMO along with the building of its online community and engaging of its individuals. In terms of slogans and methods of promotional differentiation, participants in this study emphasised the use of hashtags within their content in the hope that further use of said hashtag would amplify the visibility and reach of the brand, and cement its presence within the forefront of consumer minds. While content may differ among various target markets to accommodate the varying reasons and motivations for travelling, designing one all-encompassing hashtag that captures the spirit of the destination and inspires action on the part of the online community to participate and contribute. Participants in the present study described how they use their hashtags, such as #austnatcoll (Australian National Collection, Canberra), #makeitPHL (Philadelphia), #lifeelevated (Utah), and #thisisliving (Ireland) as ways of ensuring their brand stands out from the rest through the use of unique hashtags which will ensure social media users will link those hashtags to those specific destinations.

Destination Marketing Performance Measurement & Tracking

Pike and Page (2014) also emphasis the challenge in achieving and maintaining long-term competitiveness, citing multiple studies highlighting such cases in Eastern Europe, Asia, and sub-Saharan Africa, while also noting a lack of a widely-accepted causal model of destination competitiveness. Such analysis of the difficulty in measuring success has clearly been transferred to social media marketing, given that the findings of this study reveal the ambiguity that exists within DMOs regarding effective measurement of their social media activities measurement, and the wide deviation among DMOs in terms of the rigor of their social media measurement.

Pike and Page (2014) make specific mention to the EAV (equivalent advertising value) formula as being a popular means for DMOs to “argue the case for marketing funding”. The authors describe the formula as “simplistic”, with shortcomings. The present study uncovered such a formula being in place in one particular DMO, with the traditional EAV formula being adapted to incorporate the various forms and nuances of engagement on social media platforms.

While the authors highlight the fact that evaluation techniques related to online operations as a new line of academic inquisition, it remains a very small part of DMO operations, particularly pertaining to their social media efforts. Due to the relatively small scale of the social media operations within the organisations, it seems to have prevented the implementation of a rigorous evaluative procedure for social media. While many social media KPIs are currently in existence, it still remains to be seen how these metrics can quantifiably and categorically be attributed to tourism arrivals and prosperity in a region.

In conclusion, this study has further demonstrated the proliferation of social media platforms in our everyday lives, as well as within a business environment. While there is undoubtedly a steady rise in the number of social-media centric studies being carried out by researchers all over the world, there seems to be an uneven adoption and usage rate among DMOs. Many of the challenges faced by conventional organisations in social media, such as public scrutiny, community management, and effectively measuring ROI, continue to be faced by DMOs also. However, DMOs have the added advantage of being able to channel the ever-increasing rates of UGC publication through multiple media-specific platforms such as YouTube, Pinterest, and Instagram, as well as the more all-encompassing major networks Facebook and Twitter, in furtherance of their brand and community building endeavours.

Social media research will continue to evolve along with the platforms, and our knowledge of how to utilise each individual platform will continue to grow, allowing for more effective content design, community management, and brand evaluation. As the tourism industry continues to recover and experience growth following the economic challenges of the late 2000s, more developing economies will undoubtedly come to the fore and provide even further competition for the more established tourism destinations. Social media will provide the level playing field where DMOs will seek to build and nurture their audiences and brands in order to ensure they remain part of the conversation.

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